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# THE SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL MAGAZINE

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## SWISS SETTLERS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

By R. W. KELSEY, of Haverford College, Pa.

The following translations are descriptive of the Swiss settlements in southern South Carolina, along the Savannah River. Purrysburg was settled through the efforts of John Peter Purry, of Neufchâtel, Switzerland. The actual settlement began apparently in 1732. The climate turned out to be poor, the settlers did not prosper, and they gradually scattered to more favored places in South Carolina or elsewhere.

The two following descriptions, so contradictory in their conclusions, illustrate in outstanding fashion the difficulty of valuing critically the accounts of uncritical writers. Such variety of opinion must have been equally baffling to prospective emigrants in Switzerland. Of the two characterizations, "an earthly paradise," and "a damned fraud," the more profane phrase seems more nearly to have gained the warrant of history.

The pastor referred to in the Gondy letter was the Reverend Joseph Bügnion, a Swiss minister, who received Episcopal ordination in England as he passed through that country on his way to South Carolina.

A detailed description of the Purrysburg settlement, by Judge Henry A. M. Smith, was printed in the *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 10 (Oct., 1909): 187-219.

The German manuscripts from which the translations were made are in classification, "Auswanderung A," in the Staatsarchiv at

Basel, Switzerland. The Dyssli letter is a contemporary copy. The one by Gondy may also be a copy, although the archivists at Basel believe it is the original.

The present writer wishes to acknowledge the skilled help of his former teacher, Dr. Adolph Gerber, in preparing the following translations.

LETTER FROM ANTHONY GONDY, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA,  
TO HIS BROTHER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF LAUSANNA,  
SWITZERLAND

"Schaleton [Charleston] May 28, 1733 S. C.

Dear brother:

I did not wish to fail to report to you upon our condition and life in Carolina. Because Rev. Pignaud has left for Purisburg, where he has been engaged as pastor, and made me the solemn promise to send my letter together with his own to England and to recommend strongly that it be duly forwarded to Switzerland, hence I wished to report by these lines that by the help of God we, some 170 persons, arrived here safely and in good health after having been out on the sea 11 weeks. People in Virginia showed us much and great kindness and received us with such hospitality that it is indescribable. Thence we went to Purisburg where we were treated in the same manner and entertained hospitably for fully 6 weeks and where cousin Marianne married a man worth 50 m. [thousand ?] dollars (Thaler), who was a widower and had an only child by his first wife. He made over to her all he owns and possesses. He is a Palatine, born at Speier, by the name of Thomas Baumgartner. We attended the wedding and had a very good time. The new cousin presented me with 8 horses for the journey.

Thence we came to Charlestown, where we were again entertained hospitably as at Purisburg. Then the Commissary took us to the Savannah, a large river abounding with fish, 8 leagues, Swiss leagues, from the sea, where we built our cabins; there we assigned 50 yokes [here probably = acres] of good land, women as well as men. The soil is exceedingly good, rich and fertile. Now nobody in this country works more than 2 m. [= months]. The remainder of the time he may go fishing or hunting. There are Indians living among us, the best people, except that we can-

not talk to each other, but must communicate with each other by tokens and signs. They go half naked and have only a deer skin about their loins. For the rest they do nothing but fish and hunt, know of no other work nor like to do any other work. We have provided well for all our single women, who consisted of 13 persons. They have all been favorably married. In the old country they would not have had such good fortune. Our children have become as much acclimated to this country as if they had had been born here, because the air is so very healthful. Yet it is as hot all the year round as near Lausanne in August. Winter is unknown. When we have winter, there is occasionally a cold dew or rain, yet only by night. As soon as day comes it is warm again. There are also exceedingly fine large trees in the forests, oaks about 10 feet in diameter and more, and bearing very many acorns, so that the domesticated and wild hogs do not lack food in summer and winter. The cattle are allowed to go outdoors in summer and winter like the game. This country is quite an earthly paradise. There is plenty of all one desires.

Since the Swiss people came here, they make cheese and butter, which the people did not have before. They have also planted vines in various places which yield good wine, but they have not the presses and casks as in Europe. If, therefore, our neighbors of Morges, Nyon, St. Pré, Etoy, Aubronne, Rolle, wish to come over here, they should bring coopers with them, also whatever artisans they can get, who will become prosperous and wealthy people in this Canaan. We have immense forests from 8 to 10 days long and wide. They teem with game like ants. I and cousin Albert went hunting once with the Indians, to see how they shoot the game with their bows and arrows. It is a curious thing, but we almost missed our way home, so that we should have been obliged to pass the night with the wild beasts in the forest, if one of the Indians had not found the way by which we had entered. There are in the forests cypress trees of astonishing size, nuts, chestnuts, citrons, oranges, lemons, pomegranates, dates, jujubes, and a thousand kinds of other trees and fruit, herbs, roots. If one of our doctors of medicine could come to this country and had a knowledge of herbs, he might discover all sorts of delicious things there are herbs of quite delicious odor. We have all we want except wine, which is imported from England or

Spain, so that it costs 4 shillings a quart. For the rest we feel as if we were living in a terrestrial paradise. There are a thousand kinds of birds of all sorts of colors, red, white; large and small parrots; also a kind, of which it is said none has yet been carried to Europe, which is green and like pure gold, mingled with gray, the name of which nobody knows. The Indians call them Pitivaor. They sing as beautifully as a musical instrument, wonderfully sweet, like small flutes.

My pen cannot possibly describe the loveliness and charm of this country, and who does not come himself to this country cannot possibly believe it. I could not have believed it either if I had not seen it myself for it has been with me as with the unbelieving Thomas. What I heard related about this country in Switzerland I just regarded as a fable, but everything is even much lovelier, better and more beautiful than it was described. The Europeans have about 300-400 chickens, geese, ducks, about 6-700 pigs, 200 cows, about 400 horses. In short, it is incredible; wherefore I ask all our friends and relatives who are not of great means that they may please join us here. They will thank me for it.

Nor is the voyage at all so dangerous as we were made to believe, yet it is well if many people come together. It is less expensive. It is also well if they bring artisans of all kinds with them who are getting along best of all. They are making as much as they please, particularly the blacksmiths, cart-wrights, carpenters, masons, potters, rope-makers, linen-workers who also know how to weave cloth, because there is very much cotton here, whole forests full of it. Also all poor females who are of scanty means should come along to America if they are virtuous and sensible. They will all get along nicely inasmuch as all can make their fortune, for here men do not care for the money as they do in Switzerland. Dear brother, I feel sure that these lines will appear to you as a veritable fable, but I should be ashamed of myself if I told in them a single word not based upon truth. I am looking for you and your entire family.

A thousand regards to you, your wife, dearest children and friends! I commend you all together to the protection of the Most High.

Antony Gondy."

(NOTE:—The above letter, in German, was printed in *The American Historical Review*, 22 (Oct. 1916): 115–117. It was contributed by Albert B. Faust.)

LETTER FROM SAMUEL DYSSLI, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, TO  
HIS MOTHER, BROTHERS AND FRIENDS IN SWITZERLAND

“Carlestatt [Charleston] in Carolina,  
Dec. 3, 1737.

Praised be the Lord to the end of the heavens! In the name of Jesus my special childlike and kind regards in the first place to you, my dear mother, and to you, my dear brother Albrecht, as well as to the dear children and other brothers and sisters, friends, relatives and acquaintances! In haste I send you these few words from Carolina, through a good friend who has gone back to Switzerland. I am over here, thank God, hale and hearty, and doing at present quite nicely. I am working with an English master. He gives me every week two Bern kronen, say 50 shillings, and a plentiful board, food and drink in abundance, in addition. I have already been half a year with him. Apart from this, I was ill with fever in Purisburg about 3 months, and afterwards in Georgia at Savannah, the capital, I had the bloody flux [?] or dysentery for about six months. Also a great swelling befell me. My whole belly was swollen so that I might have burst. My doctor in these perilous times was our Lord God, for I did not take medicine from men, but trusted myself to divine care. My heart trembles when I think of the following, that once upon a farm, where many people were together and felling large trees, calling to each other when one was about to fall, when I was passing by there, a mighty large oak fell over me which ordinarily would have crushed me to atoms. But the hand of the Lord ordained that I come through between the branches and remained unhurt. Oh, how much the prayer of pious parents can accomplish! How sincerely I have always felt that on the part of my mother!

To report something of the quality of this country, I herewith wish to have everybody warned that he should not hanker to come into this country, for diseases here have too much sway, and people have died in masses, [now the children leaving their parents] then the parents leaving their children. Moreover, the children soon go [to work] the one here the other there, and are treated like

slaves and brought up in ignorance like the savages. Nor are provisions given any more to the new comers, as used to be done. Moreover, everything is exceedingly dear, e.g. a pound of butter,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  shillings, a pound of cheese 5 shillings, white wine 5 shillings a quart, red wine 10 shillings, beer 3 shillings.\* What is bought in Switzerland for a kreutzer is here a shilling. Besides the quart in this country is no larger than half a Bern "maass," the pound is also very small. In short everything is dreadfully dear. Cheapness has retired into the raw ox- or cattle-hide, an ox-hide, indeed without distinction the largest, is 20 shillings, just think, 20 shillings, and the pound of leather 2 shillings.

Carolina looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people. In Charleston and that neighborhood there are calculated to be always 20 blacks, who are called negroes, to one white man, but they are all slaves. The whites mix with the blacks and the blacks with the whites, and if a white man has a child by a black woman, nothing is done to him on account of it. Such swinishness is not punished in this country. There are brought large shiploads of these people from the African negro country. Thereupon they are put on the market and sold as a head of cattle is sold. It also occurs that the English marry, nay, mar themselves, by marrying black women, often also Indian women.

Regarding the savages: these savages are by no means terrible, ferocious brutes, as many may imagine. If one lets them alone, they will not do harm to anybody. They are kind natured, well built, strong people, but alas! they do not know anything at all of the true God. If, however, they are harmed by somebody, there is no reconciliation any more, but they try to avenge themselves in any possible way. They live like the birds of heaven, do not work, do not sow, but go hunting, pursue the deer very vigorously and the bears. There are also mighty, large buffaloes, wild ones, also tigers, wolves, wildcats twice as large as the domesticated, beavers, crocodiles. These are more than plenty, but they do no great damage. The rattle snake is a huge animal. There are some which are as thick as an ale-pot and thicker, yet they pursue no one, unless he steps on them unawares.

\* So. Ca. currency was then about 1/7 the value of sterling.

My journey hither was quite safe, thank God. On the way through France we found kind people everywhere. In London I spent 2 weeks. Across the great sea we were especially favored, for we got across in 6 weeks. God gave us very welcome winds. Our captain said he had never had such a good passage in all his life. When we were a fortnight out on the sea, we came to the exceedingly beautiful island of Madeira. There we saw the first flying fish, many hundreds of them together. Two of them dropped on our vessel. Besides, we saw horribly large fishes near our vessel. They drew in large streams of water and spit them out again with a horrible rushing and snorting.

In the meantime I tell you once more: Let nobody hanker to come to this country! True, there have come to Switzerland people whom I know well, and they have had villainous letters with them, as if Carolina were such a good country, but it is a damned fraud. If one man is well off, about 1000 others are so much the worse off. As reported above, I am at present, thank God, so well off that it would be a sin if I desired anything better. But what of it? One swallow does not make a spring. I ought to answer Puri's mendacious booklet, paragraph by paragraph, but I have not time. All citizens be kindly warned, especially those who eventually would send sons abroad, that they beware of enlisting to work in their professions in this country, unless they desire to get into great slavery, as it has happened to many whom I know quite well.

If it please God, I hope to write to you more in detail from Philadelphia or Pennsylvania in half a year hence. I must close. May the God of all grace give his peace to all of you! Amen!

N.B. My regards to cousin Andreas Grimm! Have him also read this letter.

Samuel Dyssli."